



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

2023

UNHCR has been actively promoting gender equality for decades. The proclamation of 1976-1985 as the ‘United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace’ prompted UNHCR to begin systematically addressing the specific protection risks faced by refugee women. Since that time, UNHCR’s approach to gender equality has evolved considerably, from perceiving refugee women and girls as vulnerable to promoting their empowerment, from an isolated focus on women to gender mainstreaming, and from gender equality to an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach which reinforces UNHCR’s longstanding commitment to ensuring that forcibly displaced people are at the centre of all that we do. In recognizing that women and girls are UNHCR applies an intersectional and rights-based approach which recognizes women and girls in all their differences, diversity and (dis)ability.

The commitment to integrate gender equality systematically across the agency and within operations is guided by the [UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity \(2018\)](#) which outlines obligatory core actions for advancing gender equality and [accountability to affected people](#). This is further reinforced by the [UNHCR Strategic Directions 2022–2026](#) which identify accountability to women and strengthening gender-based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response as priority areas for accelerated, additional and targeted action. The [UNHCR’ Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence \(2020\)](#) further institutionalizes collective accountability across the organization.

UNHCR’s efforts to promote gender equality and empower women and girls align with the

UN’s broader framework for integrating gender to improve the protection and promotion of women’s and girls’ rights in development and humanitarian settings including the [United Nations System-Wide Action Plan \(SWAP\) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women](#), the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), the [Grand Bargain](#), the [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#), and the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), are other relevant frameworks of reference.

Gender equality is systematically mainstreamed in all UNHCR programming. Dedicated GBV staffing and gender focal points at regional and country level support the internal capacity of operations on gender equality by providing direct technical support, including gender mainstreaming and targeted actions. UNHCR as a member of the Gender Capacity Standby Project (GenCap) Advisory Board and supports the deployment of gender experts to humanitarian cluster settings.

Additionally, UNHCR has also prioritized progress in gender equality in staffing - 44% of UNHCR’s total workforce (regular staff + affiliates) is composed of women. UNHCR also recruits refugee, returnee and IDP women as part of its workforce (e.g., in Ukraine response through the UN refugee volunteer programme). Over the years, dedicated tools and training have been developed for UNHCR staff to guide gender equality programming, including the [UNHCR Gender Equality Toolkit](#), a Gender Equality e-learning, an AGD e-learning course, several training courses on GBV risk mitigation, prevention and response and LGBTIQ+ persons in forced displacement.



📷 Cecile Irafasha, 32 years old, Rwandan refugee and mother of 3 on the right and Neema Mwamini 25 years old on the left have joined forces to open their restaurant and make a decent living in the middle of a refugee camp in DRC. Thanks to the training supported by UNHCR in culinary arts and the kits composed of sets of pots, plates, gas stove, meal thermos, tables, chairs and financial support, they can join their efforts and start their own business. © UNHCR/Blaise Sanyila

CORE ACTIONS FOR ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY

UNHCR operations undertake at a minimum five obligatory core actions to advance gender equality:

1. Equal and meaningful women's and girls' participation in all decision-making, community management and leadership structures, and committees of persons of concern
2. Individual registration and documentation for women and girls and advocates for gender equality in nationality laws to prevent statelessness
3. Equal access to and control over management and provision of food, core-relief items, and cash-based interventions
4. Equal access to economic opportunities, including decent work and quality education and health services
5. Women's and girls' access to comprehensive GBV prevention and response services


KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

- According to UNHCR's [2022 Global Trends Report](#) 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced in 2022, the largest annual increase on record. Women and girls make up 51 per cent of forcibly displaced persons. Based on the data available for 75 per cent of the stateless population, slightly more women and girls are stateless (51 per cent) than men and boys.
- Gender-based violence was continuously reported as being a top protection concern across UNHCR-led protection clusters in more than 30 humanitarian emergencies, alongside attacks on civilians including children, forced displacement, abduction and detention, and psychosocial risks – especially on women and children¹.
- In 2022, 73 per cent of UNHCR operations had GBV services available for survivors and those at risk, while GBV specialists supported 14 emergencies, including in Chile, Ethiopia, Iran, Poland, Moldova and Somalia. Emergency deployments, supported by the Safe from the Start initiative, ensured life-saving services for over 1 million forcibly displaced people.

- In 2022, UNHCR provided USD 977 million through cash-based interventions (CBI) to over ten million people in 100 countries, both in refugees (80 per cent) and IDP situations (20 per cent) and women constituted 51 per cent of recipients of CBI.
- In 2022, a total of 990,000 women and girls received sexual and reproductive health services.
- A total of 50 per cent of the 116,000 persons submitted for resettlement in 2022 were women and girls.
- In 2022, of the 1,400 refugees enrolled in higher education on DAFI scholarships, 43 per cent were women up from 41 per cent the previous year.
- UNHCR works to prevent violence against women by engaging communities in addressing harmful social norms, implementing the “Engaging men in accountable practices” in Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and Thailand, the “[SASA! Approach](#)” in South Sudan and Uganda, and the IRC [Girl Shine](#) effort in Bangladesh, Cameroon, Libya and Syria.

UNHCR'S APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

a) Meaningful participation in policy, planning and GBV prevention and response

 *Now, I feel much more self-assured. The sessions “gave me the chance to learn about my rights and understand what I, as a human being, deserve... Having to leave my country demolished my self-esteem. But now, I feel much more self-assured.”*

– Pau, a Venezuelan teenage girl who received support from Quinta Ola, an organization that won the UNHCR's 2022 annual [NGO Innovation Awards](#) (supported through [Safe from the Start](#) funding from the US Government)

The full and equal involvement of forcibly displaced women in all decision-making processes and activities that affect their lives, and the life of their community is at the heart of UNHCR's work. Sixteen organizations

¹ Global Protection Cluster Annual Report https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/annual_report_2022_1.pdf

led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons including women from the [UNHCR Advisory Board of Organisations led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons](#) which plays a critical role in providing advice to UNHCR. In GBV coordination mechanisms in refugee settings, the membership of women-led organizations (including those led by refugee women and girls) in refugee settings increased by 63 per cent in 2022 as compared to 2021. UNHCR continues to collaborate with [the refugee women-led Gender Audit Team](#) at the global, regional, and country level and is strongly committed to and advocates for the protection and inclusion of refugee women and girls and proposes alternative paradigms for refugee participation. The Gender Audit Team audited the process of achieving the Global Compact of Refugees (GCR) and has formulated several recommendations which UNHCR is currently translating into action.

b) Flexible funding practices

Forcibly displaced or stateless women-led organizations face disproportionate barriers in accessing funding. To address this challenge UNHCR has introduced [small-scale grants for grass-roots organizations](#) for organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless women to ensure that displaced and host communities are treated as equal and active partners. Additionally, in 2022 UNHCR entered into seventy-one grant agreements with organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless individuals, including with those led by women. In Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger and Ukraine, for

example, UNHCR has funded women-led organization initiatives focusing on GBV prevention and response, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. Notably, the grant agreement is significant as it enables funding to be allocated to organizations led by displaced and stateless persons, even if they are not officially registered – a barrier which refugee-led organizations often face when seeking funding.

c) Education

At global level, for every ten refugee boys in primary school there are fewer than eight refugee girls; at secondary school the figure is lower, with fewer than seven refugee girls for every ten refugee boys. Among populations where there are significant cultural barriers to girls' education, the difference is stark. UNHCR runs three flagship programmes: [Educate a Child \(EAC\)](#), the [Secondary Youth Initiative](#), and the [DAFI Scholarship Programme](#), which aim to ensure education for all and achieve gender parity in line with UNHCR's [Refugee Education Strategy 2030](#). Through the [15by30](#) strategy UNHCR aims to increase the current higher education enrolment rate from 6 to 15 per cent, while achieving equal gender representation in tertiary enrolment. Importantly UNHCR's digital and connected education solutions are also helping to bridge the digital gender gap by supporting more girls to complete primary and secondary education and prepare them to enter higher education competitively. At higher levels of learning, online and blended approaches to learning have enabled women and girls in displacement

📷 Ebenezar, 21 is the only women doing a Fitter Turner course at Don Boscho training center. "I find mechanics exciting, I made many male and female bolts for different. I am still perfecting my skill."
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settings to access education in contexts where this would otherwise be unlikely. UNHCR continuously seeks feedback from the girl and boy students it supports to tailor its education programmes, find joint solutions and identify more opportunities.

d) Partnerships with Women-Led Organizations

“Helping people is temporary; empowering people is permanent.”

Yvonne Ndaga Endam, founder of [Endam Home of Hope](#), one of the Women-Led Organisation (WLO) winners for the 2022 UNHCR NGO Innovation Award. Since 2017, UNHCR has supported women refugee-led initiatives, events and processes related to the Global Compact on Refugees. With an active role in key inter-agency networks², UNHCR highly contributes to innovative global initiatives and processes to foster gender equality (e.g., mainstreaming gender equality in the triple nexus). UNHCR as a signatory and board member of the [Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action \(WPS-HA\)](#) and the [United Nations Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#), advocates for funding to organizations led by forcibly displaced or stateless women as well as enhanced tracking of funding allocated to women-led organizations working on programming and services for survivors of GBV, creating social cohesion with host communities, strengthening the inclusion and participation of forcibly displaced women in peacebuilding, the inclusion and participation of LGBTIQ+ communities in conflict and crisis settings, improving the lives of women living with disabilities and strengthening the active participation of youth women in their communities. During 2022, the [Fund provided support to 242 civil society organizations](#), a third of which were led by a forcibly displaced person. As a result, more than 570,000 forcibly displaced women and girls gained access to essential resources, services, and leadership opportunities.

In 2022, the [UNHCR NGO Innovation Award](#) celebrated the achievements of girl and women-led organizations (WLOs) NGOs who developed innovative approaches to protect forcibly displaced and stateless persons in France, Uganda, Iraq, Peru, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria and Malaysia. Their innovative work spans from gender-based-violence protection, offering psychosocial and socio-economic support, providing legal and judicial assistance to internally displaced persons, and delivering sexual and



© Asha Suleiman, a former stateless woman from the Pemba community in Kenya, holds her daughter's new birth certificate. © UNHCR/Charity Nzomo

reproductive health courses and training programs for displaced women and girls. One of the winners, the [Lotus Flower](#) a local, community-based and women-led organization is working to respond to the emerging needs of women internally displaced, refugees and host communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Lotus Flower's work focuses on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) with inclusion of men and boys in their response, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), education, livelihoods, peacebuilding and women empowerment across all pillars.

e) Prevention of statelessness

UNHCR's [#IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness](#) in 10 years, launched in 2014, envisages the achievement of gender equality in all nationality laws by the year 2024 as part of the Campaign's broader goals. The objective of achieving gender equality in nationality laws is also supported by Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals. UNHCR continues its work with a range of governments and civil society groups to promote reform to nationality laws and assist in their implementation. At the end of 2022, more women and girls were stateless (51 per cent) than men and boys³. In 2022, 13 States improved their laws, policies and procedures to prevent and reduce statelessness. Several States reformed their nationality laws and regulations to prevent childhood statelessness. In June 2023, the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights,

² Such as the [UN-SWAP](#), [IASC Gender Reference Group](#), [Inter-Agency Network on Gender on Women and Gender Equality](#)

³ 2022, UNHCR Global Trends Report <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>

UNHCR, UNICEF, and UN Women convened the [Global Summit on Gender Equality in Nationality Laws](#), where leaders from governments, civil society and United Nations agencies called for expedited action to end gender-based discrimination in nationality laws.

For instance, the President of Liberia signed an act to amend the Aliens and Nationality Law to remove gender-discriminatory provisions which prevented women from conferring nationality on their children on an equal basis as men. Liberia is the third country to reform legislation to grant women and men equal rights in passing on their nationality to their children since the #IBelong Campaign was launched, following Madagascar and Sierra Leone. At the end of 2022, 24 countries still prevent women from conferring nationality to their children on an equal basis with men.

f) Gender-related data on forced displacement

At the end of 2022, demographic data by age and sex was available for 76 per cent of refugees and people in refugee-like situations and 50 per cent of other people in need of international protection. For IDPs, age and sex disaggregation were available for

45 per cent of IDPs protected and/ or assisted by UNHCR and sex-disaggregation was available for 64 per cent of this population. For stateless persons sex-disaggregated data was available for 75 per cent of the 4.4 million stateless people reported worldwide. Data disaggregated by both sex and age was reported for 62 per cent of the population.

UNHCR has introduced new systems to optimize the collection, disaggregation, assessment and analysis of data and UNHCR's results-based management approach incorporates mandatory core indicators that are age, sex disaggregated. On gender-related data. UNHCR supports and advocates for the work on disaggregating data and collaborates with the World Bank to improve global statistics on forced displacement through the [World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Centre](#) and the [Gender Dimensions of Forced Displacement](#) (GDFD) Research Program. UNHCR seeks to extend the research to locations where gender and forced displacement related policy dialogue and programming is currently being planned by the World Bank or other development partners.


g) Digital Inclusion: Bridging the digital gender divide

“I didn't know how to use e-mail or even how to open an account. Spreadsheets were unimaginable for me, I can now manage my accounts, keep my financial records and write to neighbours who live further away to offer my arepas and empanadas. I can earn a living directly from home and reach people I couldn't before”

Desiree Nunez, refugee in Guayaquil, Ecuador

Digital inclusion offers a transformative way for women and girls to access information, education, networks, and other resources necessary for their protection and economic empowerment even in restrictive societies. UNHCR as part of its institutional efforts to enhance accountability to affected people (AAP), has implemented a wide variety of digital interventions across operations, ranging from developing digital services and digital [communication with communities](#) channels preferred by women and girls, skills training to support women's economic empowerment in the [digital economy](#) and digitally enabled livelihoods. UNHCR has explored innovative ways to provide forcibly displaced women and girls with access to digital devices and [connectivity](#) in partnership with the private sector. UNHCR is working to bridge the digital gender gap by supporting more girls to complete primary and secondary education and to enter higher



 Zair (21) is a displaced Venezuelan in Colombia. She is currently in her first year of studying Industrial Engineering at the university. She is part of the first generation of DAFI Scholars in Medellín, Colombia. “My dream is to improve my quality of life by doing what I love.” “Supporting refugee and displaced students is about giving them an opportunity, empowering them with education and breaking the cycle of adversity. Their success not only enriches their lives, but also contributes to the development of our societies.”

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📷 Hilda Rosalia Mas Macz, 33, poses for a portrait. She is the administrative secretary of the “Ak Tenamit” Educational Centre. She is an indigenous Mayan Q’eqchi’ woman from the area and has been working at the Educational Centre for 8 years, after graduating from the same educational centre. “I do my work with great enthusiasm to motivate the other young girls that it is possible to get ahead and be an empowered and independent woman to exercise and enjoy their rights” – she says. © UNHCR/Nicolo Filippo Rosso

education competitively. To work towards safer digital spaces, UNHCR operations have developed guidance for refugees on how to safely navigate digital channels and prevent and respond to risks.

h) Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion

In 2022, women represented 62 per cent of beneficiaries of UNHCR programmes for self-reliance, economic inclusion and livelihoods and 95 per cent of participants in [MADE51](#), the flagship initiative established by UNHCR, are women. The average age of UNHCR-supported livelihood programmes females was 36.7 per cent and these programmes resulted in a 65 per cent employment rate for women, compared to 68 per cent for men. Livelihoods programmes have resulted in transformative change and results for women. A key finding of the [Evaluation of UNHCR’s Livelihoods Strategies and Approaches \(2014-2018\)](#) was that “across data sources, livelihood programmes are shown to positively contribute to household well-being and protection outcomes e.g., food security, education of children, safety, reduced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and empowerment, raising awareness about women’s decision-making, empowerment financial literacy, and women’s empowerment through improved joint household decision making.

CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY OUTCOMES

Harmful gender norms and the shrinking of civil spaces for women and girls restrict forcibly displaced women’s meaningful access and participation to leadership, economic and educational opportunities in several countries. Climate change, the upheaval of COVID-19, new and protracted conflicts exacerbate the protection risks displaced and stateless women and girls face. Additionally, underfunding severely limits UNHCR’s capacity to respond to the needs of women and girls and to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. Many barriers impede GBV survivors’ access to assistance and services including the distance to service providers, cultural taboos, difficulties and cost of travel, language barriers, stigmatization, arrest and other legal repercussions. The lack of flexible and sustainable funding particularly affects partnerships with local and displaced women-led organizations and with national counterparts which requires longer-term commitments.

Cover: © UNHCR/Caroline Irby

UNHCR high profile supporter Liza Koshy meets the TIGER Girls (These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading). A program for adolescent Syrian girls (and boys) in the UNHCR Zaatar camp in Jordan, it aims to create a personal sense of agency, meaning and connection as well as empower young women through educational activities. Liza Koshy meets Muna Al-Hariri, 14, Rania Al Bargash, 17, Sara Othman, 13, Fatima Al-Hariri, 13, and Ghazal Al-Hariri, 14. They share poems, talk about how they learn to overcome bullies in the TIGER Girls, and share their favourite subjects at school.



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